



## **E.P. Thompson, Shirley, and the Antinomian Tradition in West Riding Luddism and Popular Protest**

ROBERTS, Matthew <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0639-1634>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/28083/>

---

This document is the author deposited version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

### **Published version**

ROBERTS, Matthew (2021). E.P. Thompson, Shirley, and the Antinomian Tradition in West Riding Luddism and Popular Protest. *Labour History: a journal of labour and social history*, 86 (2), 187-214.

---

### **Copyright and re-use policy**

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

# E.P. Thompson, *Shirley*, and the Antinomian Tradition in West Riding

## Luddism and Popular Protest<sup>1</sup>

Matthew Roberts

Sheffield Hallam University

The novelist Charlotte Brontë and the historian E.P. Thompson both claimed that the Yorkshire Luddites of the 1810s were Antinomians, descendants of the seventeenth-century radical Christian sects who claimed, as Christ's elect, that they were not bound by the (moral) law. This article follows a thread that links Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* (in which he made this claim) with his later study of William Blake, *Witness Against the Beast*, which, far from being just an esoteric study of an esoteric figure, uncovered an antinomian tradition that linked the radicalism and protest of the 'age of reason' with the seventeenth century. In doing so, it revisits the relationship between Thompson and religion, still an underexplored aspect and too overshadowed by his polemical attacks on Methodism. Having sketched this antinomian tradition, the article then turns to Brontë's novel *Shirley*, which recounts the Luddism of the West Riding, and situates it in the context of Thompson's antinomian tradition, exploring why Brontë chose to present the Luddites as Antinomians. The final section tests the hypothesis of Brontë and Thompson that Luddites may have been Antinomians through a case-study of Luddism in the West Riding and the place of religious enthusiasm in working-class protest and culture in the early nineteenth century.

**KEYWORDS:** Luddites, religious enthusiasm, antinomianism, working-class culture

---

<sup>1</sup> Part of this article began life as the text for the inaugural Annual Luddite Lecture, organized by the Huddersfield Local History Society held at the University of Huddersfield, 16 January 2014. I would like to thank Dr Janette Martin for the invitation, and to the audience for stimulating questions and discussion, chaired by Barry Sheerman MP. An earlier version of this article was entered for the *Yorkshire Society's* Beresford Award for original historical research and was awarded a prize in 2017, for which my thanks to the chairman, Professor Edward Royle. I am especially indebted to the anonymous readers for *LHR* for their careful, incisive reading, and constructive criticisms which proved invaluable in crafting the published version of this article.

We see it in the Chartist chapels; in the Spen Valley, where Deacon Priestley had given wheat to “Christ’s poor”, where John Nelson had seen Satan on Gomersal Hill-Top, where Southcottians, Antinomians and Methodist Luddites were to be found at the opening of the century...<sup>2</sup>

*Shirley* was Charlotte Brontë’s attempt at historical fiction, published in 1849. Named after the eponymous character who slowly emerges as the novel’s heroine, *Shirley* is set in the Yorkshire textile districts at the time of the Luddite disturbances of 1812. While much recent scholarship has focused on the treatment of women in *Shirley*,<sup>3</sup> much less has been said about the novel’s portrayal of the Luddites, the focus of the present article. Although the plot of *Shirley* is backdated to 1812, the novel was written in 1848-49 against the backdrop of the European revolutions which engulfed large parts of the continent and the dramatic climax of Chartism. Irrespective of whether it was the Luddites or Chartists who were the real target of Brontë’s novel, most scholars have concluded that one of her main objectives was to ridicule and delegitimize both groups. As E.P. Thompson wrote in the *Making of the English Working Class* (hereafter, *The Making*), ‘*Shirley*’s limitations, of course, are in the treatment of the Luddites and their sympathisers...the novel remains a true expression of the middle-class myth’.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), 399.

<sup>3</sup> Helen Taylor, ‘Class and Gender in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*’, *Feminist Review*, 1 (1979), 83–93; Joseph Kestner, *Protest & Reform: The British Social Narrative by Women, 1827–1867* (London, 1985), 125; Peter J. Capuano, ‘Networked Manufacture in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*’, *Victorian Studies*, 55 (2013), 231–42.

<sup>4</sup> Thompson, *The Making*, 561.

And yet, surprisingly, one of the few areas of agreement between Thompson and Brontë in that treatment is the religion of the Luddites. Thompson's view, summarized in the quotation at the head of this article, is little different from that put forward in *Shirley*: Luddites were Southcottians, Antinomians, and Methodist. *Shirley* has been the focus of recent work on the portrayal of religion, but this discussion has been limited to what the novel reveals about 'the internal politics and theological controversies of the Anglican church during the 1840s'.<sup>5</sup> As this article suggests, *Shirley* can also be read as an exploration of popular religion, albeit from the perspective of an external viewer. While a considerable body of scholarship now exists on popular religion, there is still a marked tendency for historians of modern English protest to view their subject-matter in secular terms with the obvious exceptions of the Gordon Riots, the occasional reference to anti-clericalism, or the use of scripture by food rioters.<sup>6</sup> As Mike Sanders has recently observed in a study of Joseph Rayner Stephens that challenges this notion: 'The idea that the "theological" could constitute or generate the "political" ...remains, for many an unthinkable proposition.'<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> J. Russell Perkin, 'Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* as a Novel of Religious Controversy', *Studies in the Novel*, 40 (2008), 389–406; Sara L. Pearson, "'God Save it! God also Reform it!': The Condition of England's Church in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*", *Brontë Studies*, 40 (2015), 290–6.

<sup>6</sup> John E. Archer, *Social Unrest and Popular Protest in England, 1780–1840* (Cambridge, 2000), 57–60; A.J. Peacock, *Bread or Blood: The Agrarian Riots in East Anglia: 1816* (London, 1965), ch. 5; Adrian Randall, *Riotous Assemblies: Popular Protest in Hanoverian England* (Oxford, 2006), 77.

<sup>7</sup> Mike Sanders, "'God's Insurrection': Politics and Faith in the Revolutionary Sermons of Joseph Rayner Stephens", in Joshua King and Winter Jade Werner (eds), *Constructing Nineteenth-Century Religion* (Columbus, OH, 2019), 66.

Intriguingly, Brontë alleges that one of the wellsprings of Luddism was religious enthusiasm (defined here as intense outpourings of religious feeling as manifested in Methodism and millenarianism, for example). On the surface, this appears to be nothing more than loyalist, and later Tory, paranoia in which the lower orders rejected the authority of the Church and state and were seen as dangerous infidels in religion and politics.<sup>8</sup> But as recent work has made clear, Brontë was not a straightforward Tory paternalist, much less a reactionary Tory: there were both tory and radical strands in *Shirley* and the novel can be seen as an exploration of Luddism through that peculiarly West Riding amalgam, Tory-Radicalism.<sup>9</sup> Whether loyalist paranoia or not, situating Luddism in the context of religious enthusiasm was one of Brontë's shrewdest insights: the existence of Luddite Methodists or Antinomians was no more fanciful for Thompson than it was for Brontë, even if they had different motives for attributing Luddism to religious enthusiasm. This was the 'it' that Thompson was referring to in the opening quotation. Thompson's own relationship to religion also merits further and more serious investigation, which is still too often overshadowed by his polemical attack on Methodism in *The Making*.

This article begins by returning to the portrayal of religion in *The Making*, which is shown to be much more complex and central than often appreciated. Some attention is also paid to religion in Thompson's other works, notably his last book on William Blake which situated the London poet-engraver in the rich, creative, and contested

---

<sup>8</sup> Edward Royle, *Victorian Infidels: The Origins of the British Secularist Movement, 1791–1866* (Manchester, 1974), 24; Robert Hole, *Pulpits, Politics and Public Order in England, 1760–1832* (Cambridge, 1989), ch. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Roberts, 'Tory-Radical Feeling in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, and Early Victorian England', *Victorian Studies*, 63 (forthcoming, 2020).

tradition of religious heterodoxy, in particular antinomianism, which burst forth in the political and religious upheavals of the Civil War, though its origins can be traced further back.<sup>10</sup> The few extant studies on Thompson and religion have focused overwhelmingly on *The Making* and the role of Methodism; the focus in this article is mainly antinomianism but also religious enthusiasm more generally. Thompson defined antinomianism as a form of spiritual, and by extension, political autonomy, comprising essentially three elements. First, a blasphemous form of extreme Calvinism in which the elect are not bound by religious authority. Second, a more polemical and moral label wielded by religious and political elites to denigrate loose or free behaviour. Third, and of most relevance for the present article, a principled challenge to worldly authority.<sup>11</sup> The article then moves on to consider Brontë's handling of popular religion in *Shirley* which will take us, as with Thompson, into the orbit of heterodox religious enthusiasm, much of which traces its origins to the seventeenth century. The final section tests the hypothesis of Brontë and Thompson that Luddites may have been Antinomians through a case-study of Luddism in the West Riding and the place of religious enthusiasm in working-class culture during this period. While there is little explicit evidence to suggest that Luddites were Antinomians (which as a form of religious identity would have anachronistic by the early nineteenth century), there is no doubt that antinomianism was an ultra-libertarian bequest, which formed part of the political,

---

<sup>10</sup> David Como, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil War England* (Stanford, 2004). Martin Luther coined the term to attack as heretical those who argued that the law had no place in Christianity following conversion. The term comes from the Greek (nomos being the Greek word for law).

<sup>11</sup> E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge, 1993), 12–18.

religious, and cultural traditions on which radicals and protesters drew for legitimacy when challenging worldly authority.

The antinomian tradition existed alongside and could overlap with Paineite radicalism. As J.F.C. Harrison demonstrated, the links between religious enthusiasm, and millenarianism in particular, radicalism and protest in the 1790s at the turn of the nineteenth century are not difficult to document: not only were the prophecies of Richard Brothers and Paine's *Rights of Man* sold and read by many of the same people, but 'admirers of *Rights of Man* could become disciples of Brothers without any apparent inconsistency', a conclusion taken forward into the nineteenth century and refined by Iain McCalman and Philip Lockley.<sup>12</sup> Like Paineite radicalism, the antinomian tradition was resistant to popular constitutionalism and the so-called historic rights of the freeborn Englishman which shaped mainstream popular radicalism (Thompson himself was ambiguous on the relative strengths, and the relationship between, popular constitutionalism and Paineite radicalism).<sup>13</sup> This was on the grounds that such rights

---

<sup>12</sup> J.F.C. Harrison, 'Thomas Paine and Millenarian Radicalism', in Ian Dyck (ed.), *Citizen of the World: Essays on Thomas Paine* (London, 1987), 77; Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795–1840* (Oxford, 1993); Philip Lockley, *Visionary Religion and Radicalism in Early Industrial England: From Southcott to Socialism* (Oxford, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, Thompson showed that the historic rights of the freeborn Englishmen was a major feature of radical inheritance; on the other hand, he argued that Paineite radicalism, which rejected the historicist basis of rights and argued on the basis of natural rights, superseded constitutionalism, but only for a period in the 1790s. Thompson, *The Making*, 84–88, 122, ch. iv and xvi. For Thompson at least, this ambiguity was partly reconciled by his argument that constitutionalism could be revolutionary in its implications and license violent, direct action as he showed in relation to popular use of the law in *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (London, 1975). The study of Blake, which on the surface looks

were chimerical and the means to achieve them – petitioning and other forms of constitutional redress – had failed. Thus, what follows can be read as part of a revisionist historiographical current which has challenged the dominance of the constitutional idiom within popular radicalism.<sup>14</sup>

There are, of course, problems in using fiction as a historical source, but provided every attempt is made to contextualize, the problems are hardly insurmountable. The only historical source we can point to as a definitive influence on *Shirley* is the *Leeds Mercury*, the back issues of which Charlotte consulted when researching material for her novel. Brontë was in the unusual position of being both an historian of Luddism and a contemporary observer of Chartism; unusual, though hardly unique. The blend of history and historical fiction in *Shirley* is merely one example of a popular literary-historical genre, especially strong in the West Riding, in which it is impossible to separate fact from fiction, lived individual experience from collective

---

like a complete change of direction for Thompson, represented a reassertion of the Paineite-antinomian tradition.

<sup>14</sup> For the argument that constitutionalism was the overwhelmingly dominant feature of popular radicalism, see John Belchem, 'Republicanism, Popular Constitutionalism and the Radical Platform in Early Nineteenth-Century England', *Social History*, 6 (1981), 1–32; James A. Epstein, 'The Constitutional Idiom: Radical Reasoning, Rhetoric and Action in Early Nineteenth-Century England', *Journal of Social History*, 23 (1990), 553–74; Robert Poole, 'French Revolution or Peasants' Revolt? Petitioners and Rebels in England from the Blanketeers to the Chartists', *Labour History Review*, 74 (2009), 6–26. For the reassertion of a Paineite, democratic or armed tradition, see: Peter Gurney, 'The Democratic Idiom: Languages of Democracy in the Chartist Movement', *Journal of Modern History*, 86 (2014), 566–602; Matthew Roberts, 'Posthumous Paine in the United Kingdom, 1809–1832', in Sam Edwards and Marcus Morris (eds), *The Legacy of Thomas Paine in the Transatlantic World* (Abingdon, 2018), 107–132.



memory. This genre runs from at least the time of the Luddites through the post-1815 risings, Chartism, plug-drawers and beyond, or, in other words, from Frank Peel to Phyllis Bentley and Mabel Ferrett, at tradition that Thompson was certainly aware of and made use of in *The Making*; less charitable accounts might even suggest that Thompson's own work was part of this tradition given his commitment to literature and literary style.<sup>15</sup> It seems almost certain that Brontë also registered some of this remembered oral tradition – from her father who was curate at Hartshead during the Luddite disturbances – and possibly from others who had lived through these times.<sup>16</sup> The difference between accounts like Peel's *The Rising of the Luddites* (heavily mined by Thompson) – based on oral tradition, part myth, part testament of survivors – and Brontë's novel is one of degrees rather than kind. Phyllis Bentley judged *Shirley* to be 'a real, cool and solid presentation of certain historical events which occurred thirty-seven years before its publication'.<sup>17</sup> While the bulk of this article is based on a close reading of Brontë's *Shirley* this is contextualized through a range of archival (including Brontë's own correspondence) and printed sources, much of which Brontë did not have access to when researching her book, but which Thompson did.

---

<sup>15</sup> Frank Peel, *The Rising of the Luddite, Chartists and Plug-Drawers* (Heckmondwike, 1968 [1880]); Phyllis Bentley, *Inheritance* (London, 1932); Mabel Ferrett, *Angry Young Men* (Leeds, 1965). For Thompson and literature, see Luke Spencer, 'The Uses of Literature: Thompson as Writer, Reader and Critic', in Roger Fieldhouse and Richard Taylor (eds), *E.P. Thompson and English Radicalism* (Manchester, 2015), 96–118.

<sup>16</sup> Herbert J. Rosengarten, 'Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* and the *Leeds Mercury*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 16 (1976), 591–600.

<sup>17</sup> Phyllis Bentley, *The Brontës* (London, 1947), 69.

## The Making of Working-Class Religion

Thompson stands virtually alone amongst left-wing historians for his sustained treatment of religion as a central part in working-class life, certainly for those who claimed to be working within a socialist tradition. Thompson handles religion with a sureness of touch that is at once compelling and polemical, which reflects, in part, Thompson's own personal, religious, and educational background. For all his father's lapsed Methodism, and his own revulsion against the harsh educational regimen he experienced, as the son of Methodist missionaries and a pupil of the Methodist Kingswood School, Methodism, religious dissent and freethinking were important parts of his intellectual and cultural formation.<sup>18</sup> One could be forgiven for thinking that Thompson wrote only on Methodism in *The Making*, but this is not the case (there are six entries in the index under 'Antinomianism', on which more below). The anatomy of Dissent that he provides in chapter 2 of *The Making* – which, it is worth reminding ourselves did not include Methodism – is discriminating, judicious and penetrating, taking in not just Old Dissent (born of the Civil War) but also the impact of rationalism in the eighteenth century: the 'Arian and Socinian "heresy" towards Unitarianism' and deism, while also mindful of the enduring appeal of Calvinism and enthusiasm.<sup>19</sup> Few historians of the left have accorded such importance to religion, either negatively or positively; it has been far easier to reject it and caricature it – the familiar Marxist charge of 'false consciousness'. Some of Thompson's critics took the erroneous view that Thompson had in fact argued that religion *was* the opium of the people, and had

---

<sup>18</sup> Roger Fieldhouse, Theodore Koditschek and Richard Taylor, 'E.P. Thompson: A Short Introduction', in Fieldhouse and Taylor, *E.P. Thompson and English Radicalism*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, *The Making*, 27.

furnished unequivocal support for the famous Halévy thesis that Methodism saved Britain from revolution. Thus David Hempton, one of the foremost historians of Methodism: 'Thompson states that...the role of religion in popular culture was entirely negative', and 'Thompson assumes that religion by its very nature is inexorably a conservative force, and a pernicious one'.<sup>20</sup> In *The Making* Thompson goes far beyond the usual platitudes about Methodism saving Britain from revolution and teaching working people how to organize. For Thompson, religion, and in particular Dissent, was far from being a vestigial, atavistic irrational survival; it was one of the radical traditions on which working people drew creatively to fashion a working-class identity for themselves between 1780 and 1832. This radical tradition had its origins in the seventeenth century, and in particular in the hugely popular allegorical work by John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, which Thompson argued, was 'one of the two foundation texts of the English working-class movement' (the other being, of course, Paine's *Rights of Man*).<sup>21</sup> And in placing these works side by side, Thompson was illustrating a fundamental characteristic of working-class culture during the period of its making:

---

<sup>20</sup> David Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society, 1750–1850* (London, 1984), 26, 75–6. Even in his later work, which does try to do more justice to Thompson's arguments, Hempton still concludes that Thompson's 'Methodism could not be allowed to display agreeable characteristics because no religion of any kind can by definition produce good fruit': *The Religion of the People: Methodism and Popular Religion, c.1750–1900* (London, 1996), 5. For other similar characterizations, see R. Currie and R.M. Hartwell, 'The Making of the English Working Class?', *Economic History Review*, 18 (1965), 640; William Gibson, *Church, State and Society, 1760–1850* (Basingstoke, 1994), 76–7; David Eastwood, 'History, Politics and Reputation: E.P. Thompson Reconsidered', *History*, 85 (2000), 641.

<sup>21</sup> Thompson, *The Making*, 31.

areas such as religion and politics were not discrete and unconnected but different components of that culture.

Religion emerges as a complex, contradictory force in the pages of *The Making*. As Margaret Jacob recalls of her meeting with Thompson in the sixties and reading *The Making*, 'While he may have been unduly harsh on Methodism, Thompson had an ear for the religious language embedded in the new radicalism of working people during the early nineteenth century'.<sup>22</sup> Much like his treatment of popular culture, of which religion was a crucial component as he elaborated on *Customs in Common*, Thompson emphasized how religion was an area of contestation, of changing meanings. While the traditions of Old Dissent could be seen as contributing positively to aspects of the making of the working class, by, for example, containing within it a 'kind of slumbering radicalism – preserved in the imagery of sermons and tracts and in democratic forms of government' – religion could also be a culture of consolation.<sup>23</sup> Nowhere was this more so than with Methodism, which in its negative manifestations, Thompson argues, was responsible for disciplining the workforce and repressing the boisterous, hedonistic and immoral aspects of traditional popular culture. In the conversion to Methodism, 'we may see here in its lurid figurative expression the psychic ordeal in which the character-structure of the rebellious pre-industrial labourer or artisan was violently recast into that of the submissive industrial worker'.<sup>24</sup> While Thompson's description of Methodism as 'ritual psychic masturbation' has understandably cast a long shadow, his

---

<sup>22</sup> Margaret C. Jacob, 'Among the Autodidacts: The Making of E.P. Thompson', *Labor/Le Travail*, 71 (2013), 159.

<sup>23</sup> Thompson, *The Making*, 30.

<sup>24</sup> Thompson, *The Making*, 367–8.

treatment of it is actually far more subtle and judicious than this polemical ejaculation suggests. He is always at pains to distinguish the Methodist leadership from the rank and file; while the former were reactionary and concerned to inculcate subservience, the latter could be genuinely radical, thanks, in part, to the self-confidence and capacity for organization which they learnt through their practising Methodism. In other words, Thompson – like the workers he was writing about – was hostile to priestcraft and institutionalized religion. But even then, he concedes that Methodism ‘with its chapel doors open, did offer to the uprooted and abandoned people of the Industrial Revolution some kind of community to replace the older community-patterns which were being displaced. As an unestablished (although undemocratic) Church, there was a sense in which working people could make it their own’.<sup>25</sup>

If removed from the charged, polemical cut and thrust of historiographical debate – into which, it could be said Thompson, had slightly backed himself in his utter refusal to recant any of his interpretation of Methodism as set forth in the postscript to the 1968 edition of *The Making* – he would have been hard pressed to reject the so-called rebuttal by Hempton and Walsh because some of the conclusions they reached could easily have been written by Thompson himself: chapel attenders were part of popular culture even if Methodist leaders were not, while the relationship between custom and Methodism ‘might be more fruitfully interpreted as some kind of cultural exchange rather than as a matter of repression and displacement’.<sup>26</sup> But it is precisely those kinds of words – of which there are equivalents in *The Making* – that Thompson’s

---

<sup>25</sup> Thompson, *The Making*, 379.

<sup>26</sup> David Hempton and John Walsh, ‘E.P. Thompson and Methodism’, in Mark A. Noll (ed.), *God and Mammon: Protestants, Money and the Market* (Oxford, 2001), 112.

critics have chosen to ignore. As Mike Sanders usefully puts it, there is a 'reactive dialectic' in Thompson's treatment of the relationship between Methodism and radicalism, in which some of the rank and file self-consciously revolted from the strictures of the hierarchy concerning submissiveness.<sup>27</sup>

But Thompson goes further and analyses the contradictory impulses in Methodist theology, showing how it was 'troubled by alien democratic tendencies in itself': 'If Christ's poor came to believe that their souls were as good as aristocratic or bourgeois souls then it might lead them on to the arguments of the *Rights of Man*.'<sup>28</sup> For Thompson there were also commonalities and cross-overs between religious and radical impulses which tapped into the same popular thought processes: millenarianism, enthusiasm, hysteria. This led him to argue, famously and controversially, that there was an oscillation between radical mobilization and religious upsurge, the one following the other as expectations were frustrated, disappointed, and dashed. Thompson made the *tentative* suggestion (it was nothing more, though one could be forgiven for assuming he had proposed a pure equation judging from the tone of some of his critics) that there was an inverse correlation between radical mobilization and Methodist advance, a schema which, critics have argued, is too simplistic. But others have found some supporting evidence for Thompson's oscillation theory.<sup>29</sup>

One of the real achievements of Thompson in *The Making* is the way he shows how working people made religion their own. Religion was not something that was

---

<sup>27</sup> Sanders, 'God's Insurrection', 65.

<sup>28</sup> Thompson, *The Making*, 42.

<sup>29</sup> The debate is summarized in Hempton, *Methodism and Politics*, 74–6.

alien to them; though the religion of the upper classes undoubtedly was. It is telling that he was one of the first historians of the people to take millenarianism seriously, hence the famous rescue statement in the preface. Thompson was seeking to rescue 'even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott [the daughter of a Devon farmer whose prophecies began to attract thousands of followers in the first two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century], from the enormous condescension of posterity', even if, as Philip Lockley has recently and rightly pointed out, there is a degree of condescension in Thompson's own words here: 'That telling "even"'.<sup>30</sup> But Thompson did take millenarianism seriously, as demonstrated in a warm review of J.F.C. Harrison's book *The Second Coming*. In a characteristic flourish of great insight, Thompson – with more than one eye on the mainstream Labour movement and *Guardian* readership he was addressing – explained why ideas and movements like millenarianism only appeared aberrant, marginal and bizarre in the present because of 'the overwhelming ideological illness of our times [which] lies in an incredibly diminished capacity to imagine *any* human or social future beyond the next three or four years'. Millenarianism, in the past as well as the present, signified at least 'a human imagination somewhere, trying to break through the...null materialist crust'.<sup>31</sup>

It was not just millenarianism that he took seriously, but religious heterodoxy more generally, and even more so in works subsequent to *The Making*. As Thompson continued to labour intermittently, because of the pressures of political campaigning

---

<sup>30</sup> Lockley, *Visionary Religion*, vii.

<sup>31</sup> *Guardian*, 13 Sept. 1979. While congruent in some respects, millenarianism and antinomianism were not identical. On the distinction, see Paul Mueller Grams, 'Blake's Antinomianism', PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 1984, 39–42.

and other projects, on his study of William Blake, projected in 1978, his interest in religious heterodoxy deepened. Thompson actually conceived his study of Blake at least a decade earlier when he gave a lecture on Blake at Columbia University in 1968, in which he not only situated Blake in the tradition of Muggletonianism but also famously declared himself, with only slight tongue-in-cheek, to be a 'Muggletonian Marxist'.<sup>32</sup> The Muggletonians were a small radical Christian sect born in the febrile atmosphere of seventeenth-century England, whose formal numbers were small by the eighteenth century, the only regular church existed in London. But the antinomian tradition – defined more fully in the next section – which they espoused, which also took in the Swedenborgians, was much broader and more enduring than 'numbers' of chapels and worshippers may suggest, albeit still a minority tradition. As Thompson suggested in one of his less-well-known essays, there were Muggletonians on the other side of the Atlantic, while Peter Lineham has traced the survival of Antinomian Methodists in early Industrial England.<sup>33</sup> At this point, we need to reconvene on Gomersal Hill-Top, where the antinomian tradition meets the Luddites at the hands of both Brontë and Thompson.

### ***Shirley and Popular (ir)religion***

---

<sup>32</sup> Scott Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory: E.P. Thompson, the New Left Review and Post-War British Politics* (Manchester, 2011), 272–3. By the time Thompson published *Witness Against the Beast*, he wryly observed 'As the years have gone by I have become less certain of both parts of the combination'. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast*, xxi.

<sup>33</sup> E.P. Thompson, 'Roger Gibson and American Muggletonianism', and Peter Lineham, 'The Antinomian Methodists', both in Malcolm Chase and Ian Dyck (eds), *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J.F.C. Harrison* (Aldershot, 1996), 25–34, 35–51.



One connection between *The Making* and *Witness Against the Beast* which Thompson had implicitly anticipated in the former work was that Methodism in particular had been plagued with antinomian tendencies in the early decades of the movement, associated with George Whitfield's early Calvinism, until Arminianism triumphed against Calvinism. But it should be emphasized that antinomianism is being used here largely in the second of the three definitions that Thompson provided – as a polemical attack wielded by the Arminians.<sup>34</sup> Either way, as we shall see, these 'irregular Methodists' as the antinomians have been labelled, survived, and later re-emerged as primitive methodism.<sup>35</sup> It is noteworthy that Brontë presents the two main Luddites in *Shirley*, Hartley and Barraclough, as Antinomians. Why Brontë chose to depict the Luddites as Antinomians is far from clear. She may have been reworking some material from the *Leeds Mercury* about ghost stories and reports of visions (the view taken by Rosengarten), but none of these make any mention of antinomianism.<sup>36</sup> A more likely source is the thundering of clergymen in their sermons – including her own father – about the evils of heresy, schism, and irreligion. It may have served no other purpose than to ridicule the Luddites. But if Brontë had really been concerned to discredit the Luddites it would have made more sense to tar them with the brush of atheism. While this was a charge that frequently accompanied Jacobinism, Brontë settles for the lesser charge of religious heterodoxy. This is consistent with the kind of anti-Jacobin propaganda of the 1790s and 1800s, in which various discordant diatribes and even

---

<sup>34</sup> Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (London, 1974), chs 2–3.

<sup>35</sup> Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast*, 57.

<sup>36</sup> Rosengarten, 'Brontë and the *Leeds Mercury*', 597–8.

antithetical elements are homogenized.<sup>37</sup> Yet as Iain McCalman observes of this sort of loyalist whitewashing, ‘these propagandists knew their enemy’.<sup>38</sup> And so did Brontë. She gives two of the leading Luddites Biblical names *par excellence* – Moses Barraclough and Noah o’ Tim’s. Noah accompanies Barraclough when a delegation of workers waits upon the millowner Gérard Moore to parley with him over his decision to introduce machinery. As one would expect of a daughter of a Church of England clergyman, it is perhaps not surprising that Brontë equates Luddism with religious Dissent. She would have been only too aware, especially given her West Riding context, how pervasive Dissent had become by the 1840s, and how, in plebeian hands, it was often associated with radicalism in politics. It was widely believed by the early nineteenth century that religious and political enthusiasm went hand-in-hand, and that Methodism was the root of both. With their newfound confidence, some Methodists graduated from ‘evangelical preaching to independent radical prophecy,’ which saw a resurgence of the fears that had gripped Wesley in the early days of his ministry when some of his preachers had strayed ‘into chiliastic prophecy and sometimes antinomianism as well’.<sup>39</sup> There was nothing unusual in Brontë’s conflation of these: in the early pages of the novel we are informed that Barraclough’s co-religionists are ‘in the thick of a revival’.<sup>40</sup> And yet, it is

---

<sup>37</sup> E.g. Oxonian, *The Radical Triumvirate* (London, 1820); Marilyn Butler, ‘The *Quarterly Review* and Radical Science, 1819’, in her edition of Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, 1818 Text* (Oxford, 1994), 229–51.

<sup>38</sup> Iain McCalman, ‘New Jerusalems: Prophecy, Dissent and Radical Culture in England, 1786–1830’, in Knud Haakonssen (ed.), *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 1997), 314.

<sup>39</sup> Iain McCalman (ed.), *The Horrors of Slavery and other Writings by Robert Wedderburn* (Edinburgh, 1991), 10.

<sup>40</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (Harmondsworth, 1974 [1849]), 46.

still a concession of sorts from a member of the middle class to concede that Luddites may have been religious at all.

Consider the revelations of the eponymous heroine, Shirley, to Moore occasioned by his chiding of her for walking alone. Moore warns her that she might meet with Hartley. Shirley responds that she has 'already had the luck to meet him. We held a long argument together one night. A strange little incident it was: I liked it'. Having conversed on both religion and politics, Shirley concludes that though he was crazed there 'is a wild interest in his ravings. The man would be half a poet, if he were not wholly a maniac; and perhaps a prophet, if he were not a profligate'. At the very least, Brontë registers a tension between reason and enthusiasm, and there are hints of a Romantic preoccupation with 'the role that the apparently irrational could play in critiquing quasi-rationalistic accounts of experience'.<sup>41</sup> Even Moore's attempt to dismiss Hartley and Barraclough as drunks is not entirely effective:

About a month afterwards, in returning from market, I encountered him [Hartley] and Moses Barraclough both in an advanced stage of inebriation: they were praying in frantic sort at the roadside. They accosted me as Satan, bid me avaunt, and clamoured to be delivered from temptation.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps similar encounters took place on Gomersal Hill-Top and other places in the West Riding. Brontë was not alone in making the connection between drink and

---

<sup>41</sup> Andrew Smith, *Gothic Literature* (Edinburgh, 2007), 2.

<sup>42</sup> Brontë, *Shirley*, 242.

antinomianism; other accounts attest to them ‘Discuss[ing] their religion in public houses’, though these may have drawn on little more than gossip.<sup>43</sup> In this respect at least, there seems little doubt that Brontë was using the label Antinomian as a derogatory attack on loose living. Yet, there is more going on here than ridicule; Brontë is not just trying to make us laugh at the irrationality of the Luddites by burlesquing them,<sup>44</sup> and if that was her intention the result is less than successful. One of Brontë’s declared objectives in writing *Shirley* was to create real, life-like characters.<sup>45</sup> Of necessity this would have involved asking a number of exploratory questions: who were the Luddites? Where do we place them in the social and cultural context of the period? What mental furniture existed in the Luddite mind? What traditions did they draw on?

In labelling them Antinomians Brontë provides us with a tantalizing glimpse into the world of popular religion and the important role that religious enthusiasm continued to play in working-class culture. Through the pioneering work of historians like J.F.C. Harrison and others, we now know that antinomianism as well as millenarianism survived into the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and not just amongst a small band of tradesmen and artisans in London (as seems to have been the case with the recondite Muggletonians) but also ‘the simple and illiterate sort’.<sup>46</sup> Antinomianism, like Dissent more generally, was born in England at the time of the Civil War, and Brontë equates the two by describing followers of both as Ranters, after the

---

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast*, 58.

<sup>44</sup> Marianne Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion* (Cambridge, 1999), 77; John Maynard, ‘The Brontës and Religion’, in Heather Glen (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës* (Cambridge, 2002), 202.

<sup>45</sup> Brontë, *Shirley*, 39.

<sup>46</sup> J.F.C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780–1850* (London, 1979), 17, 21–2.

fanatical Antinomian sect which emerged in 1645.<sup>47</sup> We need to be clear about definitions here, especially antinomianism. We have already seen that Brontë uses this label in the polemical sense – the second of Thompson’s definition. But is there any evidence that Brontë uses the term in either of the other two ways – as a blasphemous form of extreme Calvinism, and a principled challenge to worldly authority? To answer this question, we need a fuller definition of antinomianism.

Antinomianism denoted the deeply controversial belief that God’s elect were chosen by God to be saved, not on the basis of works, merit, or even virtue (which was the basis of Arminianism) but as an act of His mercy. Having been saved the elect are, by grace, set free from the need to conform to any moral law, including the Ten Commandments: Mosaic Law was for the unregenerate. Brontë’s naming of BarracloUGH – Moses – may have been ironic: the prophet who was the recipient of the Ten Commandments was the first to be bound by the moral law; but BarracloUGH is a law unto himself. A form of extreme Calvinism (note that Hartley is also described as a Calvinist), in which God’s chosen people are instruments of divine will and justice wielding, antinomianism could be a deeply empowering and legitimating cosmology for its adherents. Antinomianism was also fundamentally levelling: God’s elect could be chosen from any social class: hence Christopher Hill’s description of antinomianism as ‘Calvinism’s lower-class alter ego’.<sup>48</sup> Like the Ranters before them, they believed that

---

<sup>47</sup> Charlotte had long been intrigued by the ‘Ranters’, She stumbled across a meeting when traversing the moors around Haworth one evening some years before *Shirley* was published. She had wanted to enter the meeting house to witness ‘the violent excitement within its walls,’ but her companion restrained her. Barbara Whitehead, *Charlotte Brontë and her ‘Dearest Nell’: The Story of a Friendship* (Otley, 1993), 87.

<sup>48</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London, 1982), 162.

God was in every person, perhaps even in everything created, which meant that it could blur into pantheism. Antinomians, in contrast to some Calvinists, held to a deeply controversial soteriology which traced its origins to orthodox Lutheranism: it was through faith not works that the true Christian lived his life and achieved salvation. For Antinomians, the doctrine of works over that of faith was a foul imposition by the establishment as a means of instilling obedience; hence Brontë has Hartley denounce the clergy for their doctrine of works:

When Mike has been drinking for a few weeks together, he generally winds up by a visit to Nunnely vicarage, to tell Mr Hall [the vicar] a piece of his mind about his sermons, to denounce the horrible tendency of his doctrine of works, and warn him that he and all his hearers are sitting in outer darkness.<sup>49</sup>

In a telling chapter title, 'Shirley seeks to be saved by Works' (chapter 14), the heroine takes it upon herself to mobilize the charitable resources of the community to ease the suffering of the workers, but the plot of the novel suggests that this could only be an interim and ultimately unsatisfactory measure. Later on, in chapter 19, when Shirley witnesses the Luddites attack Hollow's Mill, she exclaims 'This is what I wish to prevent'. Brontë's solution to the plight of the cloth workers is not a straightforward Tory paternalist solution. She realizes the limitations of charity; hence the conversation

---

<sup>49</sup> Brontë, *Shirley*, 48.

between Caroline Helstone and the worker William Farren whose pride and independence, despite his crushing poverty, is affronted by the offer:

...that day I war fair a rebel – a radical – an insurrectionist; and ye made me so. I thought it shameful that, willing and able as I was to work, I suld be I' such a condition that a young cratur about the age o' my own eldest lass suld think it needful to come and offer me her bit o' brass.<sup>50</sup>

The failure of works to redress Luddite grievances thus takes on something of an antinomian resolution. So, too, does the fate of Mike Hartley. In the final chapter, we learn that the would-be assassin of Moore is not pursued, even though everyone knows who it was: 'it was no other than Michael Hartley, the half-crazed weaver'. Community cohesion was more important than justice. The moral law is not allowed to triumph unequivocally. Yet in a characteristic twist, neither is Hartley's freedom a triumph. We learn that soon afterwards he died of delirium tremens, and in a fitting resolution Moore gave his widow a guinea to bury him.<sup>51</sup>

There are, not surprisingly, limitations and missed opportunities in Brontë's depiction of the Luddites as Antinomians, which do reflect in part her prejudices and limited knowledge of religious heterodoxy. Yet we should not berate her too much for that as she did not have, as we do, the luxury of academic studies which have traced the nature, origins, and development of religious heterodoxy from the Civil War down to the

---

<sup>50</sup> Brontë, *Shirley*, 338, 319.

<sup>51</sup> Brontë, *Shirley*, 589.

period when she was writing about. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out some of these limitations as they cast further important light on what dissident, protesting groups like the Luddites may have derived from antinomianism, and here we must return to Thompson's study of Blake and his third definition of antinomianism. As David Eastwood rightly reminds us, Thompson was just as concerned with the secular dimensions and implications of Dissent.<sup>52</sup> This is very evident in his situating of Blake in the antinomian tradition. It comes as no surprise in light of Thompson's previous studies, that he argues that Blake used the antinomian tradition to mount a critique of the emerging dominant ideology of liberal political economy – of utilitarianism, *laissez-faire*, closed un-accountable chartered corporations, the monied economy of profit and loss. Antinomianism was anti-hegemonic: 'It displaced the authority of institutions and of received worldly wisdom with that of the individual's inner light – faith, conscience, personal understanding of the scriptures...and allowed to the individual a stubborn skepticism in the face of the established culture'.<sup>53</sup> These were the 'mind forg'd manacles' Blake railed against. Thus Thompson:

Antinomianism, and in particular Muggletonianism, can be seen as an extreme recourse open to the excluded. It challenged the entire superstructure of learning and of moral and doctrinal teaching as ideology: the Reason of the Seed of the Serpent, now embodied in the temporal rulers of the earth. If we read this as a simple opposition between reason and unreason (or blind faith) then this is self-convicted irrationalism. But if we

---

<sup>52</sup> Eastwood, 'History, Politics and Reputation', 641–2.

<sup>53</sup> Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast*, 5.



consider the *actual* assumptions of the “Age of Reason” then the antinomian stance acquires a new force, even a rationality. For it struck very precisely at critical positions of the hegemonic culture, the “common sense” of the ruling groups...<sup>54</sup>

In tracing a lineage from the seventeenth century antinomian tradition and connecting it to the radical politics of the 1790s and 1800s, Blake was merely one representative of this connection. In that respect, *Witness Against the Beast* was not just a narrowly focused study of Blake. True, antinomianism was a ‘stubborn minority tradition’, but then so was Luddism from a certain point of view. Nevertheless, one can see immediately a tradition that licensed a principled challenge to worldly authority would have lent itself to a protest movement that was resisting the imposition of ‘modern’, ‘rational’ market forces into the textile trades in abrogation of the moral economy of worker’s rights.

### **Luddite Antinomians?**

If antinomianism survived into the nineteenth century, then it did so mainly in the sense of the third of Thompson’s definitions – as a tradition which erupted afresh in a number of new movements which challenged established orthodoxy and claimed the right to think and legislate for itself. Thus, we cannot dismiss as Tory paranoia Brontë’s decision to make the Luddites Antinomians. Given how much the events and personalities in *Shirley* are a reworking of real happenings, it seems unlikely that this was little more

---

<sup>54</sup> Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast*, 110.

than a figment of Brontë's fertile imagination – a literary device to add colour to her characters. It is interesting – perhaps coincidental – that the Huddersfield radical solicitor D.F.E. Sykes and his co-author G.H. Walker in their later novel *Ben o'Bills, the Luddite* (another novel based on the West Riding Luddites) also has some of the Luddites as Calvinists, and attribute the latter's resolution and sense of righteousness to their theological beliefs.<sup>55</sup> Sykes and Walkers' novel, like Frank Peel's *The Rising of the Luddites*, was supposedly written from the reminiscences of Luddite survivors in the West Riding.<sup>56</sup> That a number of West Riding Luddites were, at the very least, from a Dissenting background is beyond doubt. The list of suspected Luddites which made its way to the Home Office includes textile workers who were known Methodists.<sup>57</sup> A number of the Luddites executed at York in January 1813 had Wesleyan connections even if some were personally lapsed.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the behaviour of those Luddites in the final hours before they were executed bore some of the outward marks of religious enthusiasm: 'weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth', according to the attending chaplain.<sup>59</sup> The Calder and Spen valleys in the fifty years preceding Luddism were characterized by all manner of schism and heresy: Anabaptists and Antinomians were active there in the 1750s, and their ideas, rhetoric and tone lived on in oral tradition.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> D.F.E. Sykes and G.H. Walker, *Ben o'Bills, the Luddite* (Huddersfield, n.d.), 13, 221–2.

<sup>56</sup> Thompson, *The Making*, 496, n.1.

<sup>57</sup> The National Archives (TNA), Home Office (HO) 40/2/5, f. 9.

<sup>58</sup> J.A. Hargreaves, 'Methodism and Luddism in Yorkshire, 1812–13', *Northern History*, 26 (1990), 160–85.

<sup>59</sup> West Yorkshire Archives (WYAS), Leeds, RAD 1/81, Radcliffe Papers, Rev. G. Brown to Joseph Radcliffe, 7 Jan. 1813.

<sup>60</sup> John A. Hargreaves, 'Religion and Society in the Parish of Halifax, c.1750–1914, PhD thesis, Huddersfield Polytechnic, 1991, 114. For religion in Huddersfield, see Edward Royle, 'Religion in

These were just as much heresies in the eyes of the Wesleyan hierarchy as they were to the Church of England, and antinomianism may well have insulated the Luddite laity from the missives of the hierarchy.

If few, if any, Methodists would have described themselves as antinomians by the early nineteenth century, religious enthusiasm was in the thick of a revival. Further, the anti-clericalism which was such a marked feature of antinomianism was also still present, as was the anti-hegemonic, libertarian strand. On the occasion of the laying of the first stone of Christ's Church in Liversedge, 9 December 1812, the reactionary Reverend Hammond Roberson gave a sermon bemoaning the heresy and irreligion that was rife in the parish – an epicentre of Luddism. Among Hammond's papers is a map listing all places of Dissent in his parish.<sup>61</sup> Though Roberson did not explicitly mention the Luddites that day, their ringleaders currently awaiting trial at York, there can be no doubt that he, too, attributed the recent outrages to Dissent, heresy and irreligion: 'But according to the present opinion, received by no inconsiderable number of men, any cottage or barn may be converted into a *chapel*, and any forward presumptuous mechanic, into a teacher of religion, and a guide of devotion'. The humble mechanic-turned preacher was a real fear at this time, hence the government's bill of 1811, piloted through the Commons by the steely Lord Sidmouth, to curb the proliferation of

---

Huddersfield since the Mid-Eighteenth Century', in E.A. Hilary Haigh (ed.), *Huddersfield: A Most Handsome Town* (Huddersfield, 1992), 101–144.

<sup>61</sup> WYAS, Wakefield, WDP66/Box 2, Liversedge Christ Church, Parish Records, Map of parish, 24 Dec. 1811.

Methodist preachers.<sup>62</sup> Roberson continued – in words that could easily have been said by the Church at the time of the English civil war:

Mechanics, labourers, and unlettered artificers, presumptuously take unto themselves the honour of ministering in sacred things. Hence, instead of uncorruptness in doctrine, gravity, sincerity; that sound speech that cannot be condemned; too often, the most crude and undigested assertions are delivered for gospel truths, in language disgusting to every sober, and shocking to every pious ear, while something very unlike reverence and godly fear, at times, mixes itself with what are called religious exercises.<sup>63</sup>

Three months later, with the trials and executions over, Roberson was more explicit in a sermon he delivered at Hartshead on 10 March 1813 in which he attributed the late disturbances to ‘the astonishing absence of religious principle, and of religious regards’.<sup>64</sup>

Luddism was not the product of the absence of religious principles *tout court*; rather it was shaped by a hostility to the religion as practiced by Roberson. What really irked Roberson was that presumptuous mechanics were claiming to speak and act in

---

<sup>62</sup> McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, 51.

<sup>63</sup> Hammond Roberson, *An Account of the Ceremony of Laying the First Stone of Christ’s Church...in Liversedge* (Leeds, 1813), 25, 28. A copy of this pamphlet was presented to Charlotte by her father.

<sup>64</sup> Hammond Roberson, *War and War, Discontent and Riot traced to their source: A Sermon preached at Hartshead, near Huddersfield on 10<sup>th</sup> March 1813* (Leeds, 1813), iii.

the same of God by turning godly fear into a source of their own empowerment. In

depicting the Luddites as Antinomians it could be that Brontë is providing an answer to the question of where they derived their courage and convictions; not an insignificant question to dismiss as the full penalty for frame breaking by the time the West Riding croppers did most of their damage was death as some would find to their cost. Hartley and Barraclough are men of principle. Barraclough denounces Moore as Satan and his machines 'infernal'. On a simple level, it is easy to see the attraction for Brontë of a theology that, based on a crass reading, liberates its adherents from being bound by the (moral) law. It explains how the Luddites could be moved to commit serious crimes, including murder. But antinomianism is not quite the theological equivalent of a 'get out of jail card'. For in rejecting the moral law and claiming to be guided by God's will, the Antinomian 'found their moral obligation increased, and the gravity of any offence sharpened'.<sup>65</sup> As such, breaking the law was no trivial matter. There can be no doubt that the Antinomian believed they were engaged in God's holy work: in Barraclough's case by leading an ambush of the wagons bringing the machines to Moore's mill and attempted assassination in the case of Hartley. The significance of making Hartley and Barraclough Antinomians goes beyond this. What Brontë is rightly alerting us to is that the Luddites were rooted in a culture that did not share the values, assumptions, and beliefs of the period in which she was writing, much less our own. There was more than a hint of the Godly idiom of the English Civil War in both Hartley and Barraclough, and like the religious conflicts of that period, Hartley and Barraclough were a reminder that the common people had a crucial role to play in the battle against Antichrist.

---

<sup>65</sup> Gertrude Huehns, *Antinomianism in English History* (London, 1951), 13.

This idiom is also present in many of the threatening letters, notices and placards issued by the real Luddites in the West Riding, which certainly show traces of antinomianism as an anti-hegemonic, ultra-libertarian discourse. As Kevin Binfield observes, the West Riding Luddite addresses were often characterized by ‘a language of vengeance and moral indignation’, and occasional ‘millenarian expressions’ and ‘religious notions of divine judgment and retribution’ ‘which calls to mind the political and religious strife of the seventeenth century’.<sup>66</sup> Binfield notes that religious idioms were a stronger feature in West Riding Luddism than was the case in either the East Midlands or the North-West, but he does not really account for this. As he rightly observes, while the croppers had ‘fewer problems of self-constitution’ which meant that ‘Luddism did not enter a discursive vacuum’, because of a rich tradition of a long and venerable trade, the problem that they did face was ‘how they ought to continue to think of and represent themselves as a constituted body after their legal protections and sanctions had been removed by a government that was complicit with the large capitalists’.<sup>67</sup> Thus, it could be argued that religion, and Biblical authority as wielded by the Luddites themselves, was one response to that problem (Jacobinism and Paineite radicalism was another). None of the established religious discourses on offer readily lent themselves to such a subversive purpose, and neither did the constitutionalism of mainstream popular radicalism; but the antinomian tradition did.

---

<sup>66</sup> Kevin Binfield (ed.), *Writings of the Luddites* (Baltimore, MD, 2004), 200, 209, 221, 231. Thompson included Luddite texts in his wide-ranging essay on threatening letters and paid some attention to religious language, but mainly in relation to the Swing movement: ‘The Crime of Anonymity’, in Hay, Linebaugh, Rule, Thompson and Winslow (eds), *Albion’s Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (Harmondsworth, 1975), 289–92.

<sup>67</sup> Binfield, *Writings of the Luddites*, 47–48.

While the Luddites call on the 'Almighty to hasten...happy times', they present themselves as instruments of Divine Will, who 'understand and co-operate with God's purpose': 'we won't only pray but we will fight'.<sup>68</sup> Adopting the antinomian language of denunciation of the wicked by the righteous elect, the Huddersfield magistrate Joseph Radcliffe is threatened 'this is the last warning thou will have from us thou wicked tyrant who perscuteth the Good and Righteous'.<sup>69</sup> Here the use of 'thou' is similar to that used by the Ranters and Quakers as 'gestures of social protest'.<sup>70</sup> The levity with which Luddite humour treats notions of hell and the devil is reminiscent of the Antinomians at the time of the Civil War. The famous song 'T'Three Cropper Lads o'Honley' which was allegedly sung by the Luddites after the murder of William Horsfall, depicts the croppers as so unruly and a law unto themselves when they reach Hell that they are too much for the Devil who wants them ejected from his kingdom.<sup>71</sup> Even the murder of Horsfall is justified on the grounds that this will result in him being 'summoned before the awfull Tribunal, and that God who will Judge every Man according to the Deeds done in the Body'.<sup>72</sup> In a move that signalled turning the world upside, of abasing those who were high and raising those who were low, 'Edward Ludd' of Huddersfield reminded his bother 'General Ludd' of Nottingham that 'you are mad[e]

---

<sup>68</sup> Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, 153; TNA, HO 40/1/1, Copy of threatening letter 'To Mr Smith Frame Holder at Hill End Yorkshire', 9 or 10 March 1812, f. 50v.

<sup>69</sup> WYAS, Leeds, RAD 126/95, Radcliffe Papers, 'Secretary to the Brotherhood to Joseph Radcliffe, 29 Oct. 1812.

<sup>70</sup> Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, 189.

<sup>71</sup> First reprinted in the *Huddersfield Times*, 22 Jan. 1881. For Antinomianism and Hell, see Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, 170–83.

<sup>72</sup> WYAS, Leeds, RAD 126/38, Radcliffe Papers, 'A.B.' to Joseph Radcliffe, 27 Apr. 1812.

of the same stuf as Gorg Gwelps' [sic.], a reference to either the Prince Regent. Inverting the charge of antinomian looseness, Edward Ludd denigrates 'that blackguard, drunken whoreing [sic.] fellow called Prince Regent'.<sup>73</sup>

Several historians, invariably ones steeped in dissent of one kind or another, have long argued that the apocalyptic, millenarian, and radical currents of the Civil War period outlived the seventeenth century, and were still being felt one hundred and fifty years later, Thompson foremost amongst them. From this perspective, Luddism makes more sense when viewed as the last gasp of a traditional culture, one that was much closer to the early modern era than it was to the modern.<sup>74</sup> One of the mistakes of many historians of Luddism is the attempt to render the Luddites more modern than they actually were, as a way of making them fit into teleological assumptions about the modernization of popular protest: the Luddites were frustrated trades unionists; incipient radicals if not revolutionaries; harbingers of a class-conscious working class, and so on. In reality, the Luddites were more akin to angry peasants who, traditionally, had vented their frustrations in a variety of ways: incendiarism, violence against property and persons; charivari and forced levying of money. As Katrina Navickas has shown, Luddism in the West Riding took much of its character from the rural communities in which it flourished.<sup>75</sup> Like their Midlands' counterparts, the West Riding

---

<sup>73</sup> WYAS, Leeds, RAD 126/46, Radcliffe Papers, Edward Ludd to General Ludd signed Peter Plush, 1 May 1812.

<sup>74</sup> Matthew Roberts, 'Luddism and the Makeshift Economy of the Nottinghamshire Framework Knitters', *Social History*, 42 (2017), 365–98.

<sup>75</sup> Katrina Navickas, 'Luddism, Incendiarism and the Defence of Rural "Task-Scapes" in 1812', *Northern History*, 48 (2011), 59–73.



Luddites deployed the traditional tools of rural terror: arson, blackening of faces, forced contributions levied on the community, food rioting, damage to property, including plant maiming, robbery and demands – at gunpoint – that farmers reduce their prices for provisions. Some of the Luddites executed at York had family members who were engaged in agriculture – hardly surprising given the enduring dual economy of agriculture and cloth making that had long characterized the West Riding.<sup>76</sup> While the headquarters of Luddism might have been on the outskirts of Huddersfield, many of the attacks took place in the surrounding countryside: Crosland, Marsden, and Gildersome were still villages, albeit large and manufacturing ones.<sup>77</sup> The master cloth dresser Joseph Mellor, cousin of George Mellor – the Luddite convicted of murdering William Horsfall – had a farm.<sup>78</sup> It was not just shearing frames that were at risk; threshing machines, too, were objects of hatred in the countryside: a number of tenants of Spencer Stanhope (of Canon Hall, near Barnsley) took down their ‘thrashing machines’.<sup>79</sup> At other times, an atmosphere of rural revelry characterized Luddism, as demonstrated by the many songs that were composed and sung.<sup>80</sup> The croppers could be an unruly bunch

---

<sup>76</sup> Thomas Shillitoe, *Journal of the Life, Labours and Travels of Thomas Shillitoe* (London, 1839), 188; Adrian Randall, *Before the Luddites: Custom, Community and Machinery in the English Woollen Industry, 1776–1809* (Cambridge, 1991), 91; BPP, *Select Committee on State of Woollen Manufacture of England: Minutes of Evidence*, 1806 (268a), vol. III, 447.

<sup>77</sup> WYAS, Leeds, RAD 126/30, ‘A Friend to Justice’ to Radcliffe, 11 Apr. 1812; BPP, Population: Comparative account of Population of Great Britain, 1801, 1811, 1821 and 1831, 1831 (348a), 316, 322.

<sup>78</sup> TNA, HO 42/129, Deposition of William Thorpe, 19 Oct. 1812, fos. 7–10.

<sup>79</sup> Barnsley Archives, SpSt 60564, Spencer Stanhope Papers, John Howson to Walter Spencer Stanhope, 26 Apr. 1812, f. 975.

<sup>80</sup> Francis Raynes, *An Appeal to the Public, Containing an Account of Services Rendered during the Disturbances in the North of England in the Year 1812* (London, 1817), 19 (arson); *Leeds Mercury*, 18 Jan.

– ‘wild and reckless’ in Frank Peel’s words, a rough culture that was a reflection of their status as degraded artisans. As we have seen with the ‘T’ Three Cropper Lads o’Honley’, Brontë was not presenting her readers with a caricature in depicting Barraclough and Hartley in these terms.

A central component of this traditional popular culture was superstition – belief in omens, auguries, dreams, magic, demons – and religious fanaticism. For example, copies of John Tregortha’s hugely popular *News from the Invisible World...Accounts of Apparitions, Ghosts, Sceptres* (1800) circulated in the West Riding.<sup>81</sup> These supernatural facets of popular culture were central to the antinomian tradition: ‘Manifestations of the supernatural...circumvented the mediatory interpretive force of either existing human institutions or the biblical text, thereby becoming an immense source of self-expression and liberation from all religious and political authorities.’<sup>82</sup> When this popular culture was placed under duress – such as a prolonged period of war as was the case with the Luddites who were feeling the pinch of the Orders in Council and the toil of the long war against the French – it could explode into violent protest and/or millenarian movements. Even Methodism could prove compatible, syncretic even, with popular magical and pagan beliefs.<sup>83</sup> As historians of popular protest are now beginning to appreciate more fully, the context for this culture which survived into the early

---

1812 (face blackening), 16 Apr. 1814 (destruction of a garden belonging to an informer); TNA, HO 42/126, deposition of Edward Hepworth, 22 Aug. 1812, f. 386; Peel, *Rising of the Luddites*, 120 (songs).

<sup>81</sup> *Leeds Times*, 28 Sept. 1839.

<sup>82</sup> Christopher Allen Rogers, ‘A Dissident’s Revolution: Religious Antinomians in American Culture, 1740–1830’, PhD thesis, Northwestern University, 2006, 60.

<sup>83</sup> John Rule, ‘Methodism, Popular Beliefs and Village Culture in Cornwall, 1800–50’, in Robert D. Storch (ed.), *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth Century England* (London, 1982), 61–67.

nineteenth century, was the countryside. Brontë would have been aware of aspects of this traditional popular culture from the weird and wonderful stories that Tabitha Aykroyd, the Brontë family's servant, told when the children were young.<sup>84</sup> Brontë is also particularly good on the semi-rural context of Luddism: even the mill towns were, like Haworth, set against a dramatic setting with workshops dotted around the countryside. Hartley, we might note, was also a poacher – a common crime of the semi- and rural worker, and it certainly took place in and around the clothing villages of the West Riding during the Luddite disturbances as reports to the Lord Lieutenant testify.<sup>85</sup> With the exception of the odd mill, the landscape that Brontë sketches is largely rural – much like Haworth. As she used to remind people, Haworth was 'ringed with mills as well as moors'.<sup>86</sup> The various plots of the novel revolve around the parish, the village, the estate, the remote pathway, the common, the heath, and the forest – each of which abounded in the Calder, Colne and Spen valleys.

In this kind of traditional environment, people proclaiming the second coming of Jesus Christ or relaying their visions would not have been outside the ordinary. Prophets were an accepted part of popular culture, and they were an integral part of the radical underworld, a world which existed well beyond London and the West Country.<sup>87</sup> It is, then, perhaps no coincidence that Brontë registers this millenarianism, which occupied a similar place as antinomianism. It could be argued that the emphasis Brontë

---

<sup>84</sup> Gordon, *Brontë*, 27.

<sup>85</sup> Sheffield Archives, F46/45, Wentworth Woodhouse Muniments, Report of Association for Preservation of Peace in Wapentake of Agbrigg, 7 Aug. 1812.

<sup>86</sup> Brontë, *Shirley*, 242; Brian Wilks, *Brontës of Haworth* (London, 1986), 16.

<sup>87</sup> Lockley, *Visionary Religion*, ch. 2.

places on these forms of religious heterodoxy is evidence of what some critics have seen as the anachronism of *Shirley* – as far as its exploration of working-class protest in the 1840s goes. While there were, perhaps, few Antinomians by the 1840s, there were many more millenarians. Philip Lockley has shown that there were Southcottians – the millenarian followers of the prophetess Joanna Southcott – active in Huddersfield into the 1830s, who may have been successors to earlier groups of millenarians in the town.<sup>88</sup> Chartism also registered millenarianism, and not just at the margins of the movement as the rhetoric of the movement illustrates only too clearly.<sup>89</sup>

To return to *Shirley*, Mike Hartley is not only an Antinomian, leveller, and Jacobin, he is also a visionary, an integral role for the would-be prophet. We are told in the first chapter that ‘He is a very Ezekiel or Daniel for visions’. Hartley had relayed one of his visions to Mr Sweeting, one of the curates, which he had received in the forest (where else?) which foretold of the impending bloodshed and civil conflict between the manufacturers and labourers.<sup>90</sup> As Alan Brooke and Lesley Kipling have observed, in March 1801 it was reported to the Home Office that secret oaths were being administered in Huddersfield by a group known as the Ezekielites who were part of the revolutionary underground of United Englishmen, a group feared for their religious and political radicalism.<sup>91</sup> There is circumstantial evidence to suggest that some of those involved in West Riding Luddism may have been United men, or, perhaps more likely,

---

<sup>88</sup> Lockley, *Visionary Religion*, 68–9.

<sup>89</sup> D. Herbert, ‘Chartism and the Churches’, MPhil thesis, University of Manchester, 1982, 77–89.

<sup>90</sup> Brontë, *Shirley*, 49.

<sup>91</sup> Alan Brooke and Lesley Kipling, *Liberty or Death: Radicals, Republicans and Luddites* (Huddersfield, 2012), 13–14.

had been in the previous decade: documents associated with the United Britons were found at Forster's Mill following the Luddite attack in April 1812.<sup>92</sup> Further evidence of enduring United ideology was the claim that the Luddites were in league with the 'Catholics of Ireland' who had promised assistance (no evidence here of popular anti-Catholicism), though again how much this was loyalist paranoia is impossible to say.<sup>93</sup> The eponymous group took Ezekiel Chapter 21, verses 26-7 as their text: 'Thus saith the Lord God: Remove the diadem and take off the crown, this shall not be the same: exalt him that is low and abase him that is high'. And 27: 'I will overturn, overturn, overturn it, and it shall be no more until he come whose right it is and I will give it to him'. These were the same Biblical texts used by the Ranters in the seventeenth century. The books of Ezekiel and Daniel are two of the most prophetic books in the Bible, and for that reason were especially popular with millenarian groups. Luddites in the North-West also read the same verses from the book of Ezekiel at their meetings.<sup>94</sup> These examples of biblical knowledge are hardly surprising given the familiarity of popular audiences with the Bible at this time allied to the fact that the biblical language was a hegemonic discourse open to appropriation by dissident groups such as radicals and Luddites.<sup>95</sup> One of the informers against the Huddersfield Luddites, Joseph Barrowclough, told the

---

<sup>92</sup> The Reverend W. R. Hay forwarded a copy of a United Irish Constitution to the Home Office, found near John Foster's mill at Horbury, the location of a Luddite attack on 9 Apr. 1812. TNA, HO 40/1/4, Hay to Home Office, 16 May 1812, f. 40; HO 42/124, f. 680.

<sup>93</sup> TNA, HO 40/1/7, Memorial of Secret Committee for Preventing Unlawful Depredation on Machine and Shearing Frames in the Town...of Huddersfield, 29 Apr. 1812, f. 25

<sup>94</sup> TNA, HO 42/131, Deposition of Joseph Taylor, 18 Apr. 1812, f. 262v. For Luddism in the North-West, see Katrina Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism in Lancashire, 1798-1815* (Oxford, 2009), 192-201.

<sup>95</sup> Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Languages, 1791-1819* (Oxford, 1984), 128-30, 171-201.

authorities that the Luddites believed that they were engaged in holy warfare, calling themselves ‘Godly,’ and that they took the same verses from Ezekiel.<sup>96</sup>

It is worth pausing over Barrowclough’s testimony as it is one of the few extant pieces of evidence that the Luddites were ‘Godly’. The Reverend William Hay – of future Peterloo fame – and the zealous Stockport loyalist solicitor John Lloyd were inclined to believe Barrowclough’s testimony, while the Huddersfield magistrate Joseph Radcliffe was not. Radcliffe was ‘apt to believe Barrowclough completely trotted you all’. This seems unlikely, for as Hay pointed out ‘it appears to me that it is scarcely possible that he should mean to trot us’ given that Barrowclough was ‘somewhat light in his upper regions’.<sup>97</sup> Radcliffe’s dismissiveness was more likely the result of his feeling piqued as a magistrate jealous of his domain because of the interference of outside figures who had no formal jurisdiction in his region.<sup>98</sup> Barrowclough’s testimony is not the only evidence we have of Luddite religiosity. The language of Biblical vengeance also made its way into the death threats issued by the Luddites to known enemies, including Joseph

---

<sup>96</sup> TNA, HO 42/125, Deposition of Joseph Barrowclough, 7 Jul. 1812, f. 8v.

<sup>97</sup> WYAS, Leeds, RAD 1/6, Radcliffe Papers, Rev. William Hay to Joseph Radcliffe, 10 Jul. 1812, and Radcliffe’s reply 11 Jul. 1812.

<sup>98</sup> E.g. WYAS, Leeds, RAD 1/18, Radcliffe to John Lloyd, 16 Aug. 1812; RAD 1/24, Radcliffe to Rev. Charles Prescott, 22 Aug. 1812.

Radcliffe,<sup>99</sup> and the illegal oaths that many of the Luddites swore were likewise solemnized, though this may have been little more than incantation.<sup>100</sup>

The purpose here is not to suggest that all, or possibly even most, Luddites were Antinomians and millenarians; but it is probable that some may have been. The age of reason was also the age of enthusiasm. While the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed great leaps forward in terms of man's taming of the natural world, of harnessing the power of steam, of expanding empires, it also witnessed intense outpourings of religious enthusiasm, of a belief that the world was entering its final days. Under the combined impact of industrialization, urbanization, and the pains that these societal forces brought with them, allied to the impact of the French Revolution and a prolonged period of warfare, all manner of certainties were shaken, just as they had been in the seventeenth century. During these turbulent periods millenarianism became markedly eschatological and apocalyptic – hence the hysteria of Barraclough and Hartley. It was no coincidence that this period gave birth to numerous prophets from Richard Brothers to Joanna Southcott and beyond, a product mainly of the febrile 1790s rather than any underground survival. Given what we know about millenarianism – that it is in situations of extreme distress and anxiety that prophets and millenarian movements develop – it would be odd if Luddism had not registered

---

<sup>99</sup> WYAS, Leeds, RAD 1/95, Radcliffe Papers, anonymous threatening letter to Joseph Radcliffe, 29 Oct. 1812.

<sup>100</sup> For the (in)famous Luddite oath, and evidence that a version of it was circulating in the Huddersfield area, see TNA HO 40/1/1, part 2, Secret Committee for Preventing Unlawful Depredations on Machinery and Shearing Frames in...Huddersfield to Home Office, 29 Apr. 1812, f. 21.

some of these currents which were just as much a part of the mental furniture of plebeian radicals and protesters as was Thomas Paine.

## Conclusion

For Brontë as for Thompson, men like Hartley and Barraclough had values and beliefs – perhaps not the values and beliefs of the 1840s, and certainly not the beliefs of Charlotte Brontë and the propertied classes, but beliefs nonetheless. The Luddites were not unthinking men who, in moments of madness, destroyed machines. Here a comparison with Dickens's portrayal of the Gordon Riots in *Barnaby Rudge* is instructive. For all his enduring sympathy for the plight of the poor, Dickens ultimately reinforces the elite view of protest as the work of an irrational mob: 'the great mass never reasoned or thought at all, but were stimulated by their own headlong passions...'<sup>101</sup> Brontë, for the most part, does not present Luddism in these terms. It is too neat to compartmentalize the working-class mind at this time into politics, protest, and religion. By trying, however furtively, to probe the Luddite mind, we are reminded that this period, like the English Civil War before it, was one of overturning, questioning and re-evaluating norms. Luddism can be seen as one of the many manifestations of a society in flux, and one of the traditions drawn on was that of antinomianism. As Bridget and Christopher Hill tartly observed in a review of Thompson's *Witness Against the Beast*, 'Historians tend to think that ideas for which there is no printed or manuscript evidence do not

---

<sup>101</sup> Ian Haywood and John Seed, 'Introduction', in Ian Haywood and John Seed (eds), *The Gordon Riots: Politics, Culture and Insurrection in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), 9.



exist'.<sup>102</sup> Antinomianism as an anti-hegemonic, libertarian critique of authority – whether Church or state, liberal political economy and the manufacturers who espoused it – is a case in point. Armed with their antinomianism, Luddites saw themselves as 'wielding cosmic justice' to quote Peter Linebaugh. To paraphrase Linebaugh on the influence of utopian socialism on the Luddites, this is not to argue that all Luddites were Antinomians, but perhaps some were and many others listened to them.<sup>103</sup> As historians we have paid insufficient attention to this aspect of Luddite culture. While Brontë appreciated, far more than she has been given credit for, that there was something other-worldly about the Luddites, portraying them as such was not part of an attempt to ridicule them. There is more to *Shirley* than Thompson's judgement: 'the novel remains a true expression of middle-class myth.'<sup>104</sup> The Thompson of *Witness Against the Beast*, published thirty years after *The Making*, might have given Brontë a little more credit for making the Luddites Antinomians.

### Notes on contributor

Matthew Roberts is Associate Professor in Modern British History at Sheffield Hallam University. He works mainly on nineteenth-century British political and cultural history, with research specialisms in the history of popular politics and protest, the visual and material culture of politics, and more recently the history of emotions. His book *Chartism, Commemoration and the Cult of the Radical Hero* was published by Routledge in 2020, now available in paperback. He is currently completing a monograph, under

---

<sup>102</sup> Bridget and Christopher Hill, 'E.P. Thompson's Blake', *Literature & History*, 3 (1994), 85.

<sup>103</sup> Peter Linebaugh, *Ned Ludd & Queen Mab: Machine-Breaking, Romanticism, and the Several Commons of 1811–12* (Oakland, CA, 2012), 8, 20.

<sup>104</sup> Thompson, *The Making*, 561.

contract with Manchester University Press, provisionally entitled *Democratic Passions: The Politics of Feeling in British Radicalism, 1809–1848*.

Correspondence to [matthew.roberts@shu.ac.uk](mailto:matthew.roberts@shu.ac.uk)